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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL, DRL/IRF
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PARTY OF EXTREMIST BUDDHIST MONKS
STIRS UP TENSION DURING HOLIDAY SEASON

REF: COLOMBO 1895 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: The Buddhist extremist JHU party looks set to stir up religious tension during this holiday season. Its members have made several ultimatums to the government and say they will begin a "fast-unto-death" if these demands are not met by December 12. The party is also actively planning commemorations for the one-year death anniversary of Soma Thero, an outspoken monk who was a lightning rod for Buddhist extremism. The Supreme Court will hear a challenge on December 7 to the JHU's proposed constitutional amendment elevating Buddhism to the status of state religion. In the meantime, there have been attacks on three Christian churches since November 1, with a mixed response from the police. The Christian Affairs Ministry does not seem capable of staying informed about the various pieces of religious-related legislation or the attacks on churches. While the JHU is likely grandstanding for political attention, the upcoming anniversary of Soma Thero's death is giving cause for some concern among Christians, but considerably less so than a year ago. End Summary.

Christmas in Colombo

2. (SBU) Despite statistics showing only eight percent of Sri Lankans are Christian, the Christmas season is in full swing in Colombo. Building facades are decorated with lights, shop windows are adorned with garlands, and some of the larger retail outlets would rival the atmosphere of a U.S. department store in December. The Buddhist extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party, with nine monks in Parliament, has different sentiments about this holiday season and is raising a ruckus on several fronts.

The JHU and its political relevance

3. (C) In addition to the JHU's recent proposal to give Buddhism the status of state religion through constitutional amendment (see below), the party's MPs have been vocally pressing other ultimatums. Several of the JHU monks have publicly announced that they will start a "fast-unto-death" if the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) does meet their demands by December 12. They want:
-- A Presidential investigation into the December 12, 2003 death in St. Petersburg Russia of Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thero (a marginal figure in the Buddhist clergy known for his extremist beliefs who advocated against everything, including Christianity, Hinduism, liquor, that he believed interfered with being a "pure" Buddhist);
-- A ban on liquor sales in all supermarkets; and
-- A date for its anti-conversion bill to be voted on in Parliament.

4. (C) Most contentious, perhaps, is the issue of Soma Thero's death. Since his death and cremation ceremony on December 24, 2003, extremist Buddhists have alleged that a Christian conspiracy was responsible for his death although there is no evidence of this. GSL medical officials conducted an autopsy and ruled his death was due to natural causes -- he was in poor health and traveled against doctors' advice. With the one-year anniversary of his death approaching, JHU members and other Buddhists are planning commemoration ceremonies and rallies. As with his death last year, Christians are concerned that this anniversary could again foment anti-Christian sentiment. (Many interlocutors feel that the heavy police presence and government denouncement of potential violence prevented the attacks feared last Christmas Eve.)

Supreme Court and the proposed constitutional amendment

5. (C) Compared with the public clamor over the JHU's previous religious anti-conversion bill, there has been little public discussion of the party's recently proposed constitutional amendment to make Buddhism a state religion (see reftel). There also seems to be little awareness of the Supreme Court hearing on the proposed amendment, scheduled

for December 7. Contacts in the Christian Affairs Ministry, as well as the Catholic Church and some other Christian groups, told poloff on December 6 that they did not know about the upcoming case before the Supreme Court. Alternatively, interlocutors representing Hindus, evangelicals, and long-established Anglican congregations recently told poloff they would instead choose to support the petition filed by the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a local think tank challenging the proposed amendment in the court. Since the proposed amendment is more than a "Christian issue," none of the Christian groups wanted to be seen opposing the amendment individually. (Note: There has been little public debate on the proposed amendment, largely because there has been little media reporting on it. Of those aware of the issue however, we have not met any interlocutors -- of any faith -- who think this amendment is a good idea. Institutionally, the JHU supports the amendment, although it is struggling with internal dissension on the issue. End Note.)

16. (C) There has been no official stance by the GSL on the JHU's proposed amendment. In a December 6 conversation with poloff, D.W. Abeywickrama, Secretary to the Buddhist Affairs Ministry, said that since the amendment is a private member's effort, his ministry had not been asked for its view. He admitted he had seen the draft amendment but had not studied it in detail and, therefore, could not say what the GSL's official view would be. He indicated that the ministry would wait for direction from the Supreme Court's ruling before taking a stand. Officials at the Christian Affairs Ministry will not comment on the amendment since they state it "has not been officially referred" to them. Following the Supreme Court hearing, the JHU amendment will likely follow a track similar to the group's anti-conversion legislation: review and revision in the Attorney General's Department before being returned to Parliament for a reading a possible vote. At present, there is no timeframe for a vote, but it is unlikely to occur in the short term.

Attacks continuing on churches

17. (C) While the efforts to legislate cultural and religious differences between the various faiths in Sri Lanka play out, there remains a separate, but related tension exhibited in the continuing attacks on Christian churches. Since November 1, three Christian churches have been attacked. In the most egregious incident, intruders attacked a pastor and his family at the Margaya Fellowship Church in Matugama, located approximately 45 miles south of Colombo. While this is not the first incident of harassment against this church, on this occasion, the attackers hacked off the pastor's wife's hair with a sword before setting fire to parts of their residence. Police have not made any arrests to date. More recently, the Assembly of God church in Yakkala (some 30 miles east of Colombo) was attacked on November 14. The pastor informed the police that he recognized the alleged Buddhist perpetrators from previous attacks on the church, but the police have claimed they do not have any evidence to arrest anyone. On December 2, the Believers' Church in Kuliyaipitiya (60 miles northeast of Colombo) was attacked; the pastor was threatened and the church was vandalized. Police initially detained three people for questioning, but released them after the pastor agreed not to press charges in exchange for assurances of no further harassment.

Little advocacy from the Christian Affairs Ministry

18. (C) Recent discussions with officials at the Ministry of Christian Affairs suggest that attacks on independent evangelical congregations fall below the Ministry's radar screen. Ministry Secretary Manel Kuruppu told poloff recently that outside of the Catholic Church and the National Christian Council (NCC), which represents long-established Anglican churches, her ministry had little contact with evangelical or other Christian groups. Her argument was that those groups are not represented by umbrella organizations and the ministry thus cannot be expected to speak with each church and organization individually. She said she had not communicated with NCEASL and was not aware of the National Christian Fellowship, which also represents a segment of evangelical churches. (Note: More disturbing, she did not seem inclined to initiate contact with them either.) Yogarajah confirmed Ms. Kuruppu's comments, stating that NCEASL had a representative on an intra-ministerial committee under the prior United National Party (UNP) government, but had only spoken with ministry officials "a few times" since the April 2004 change in government.

19. (C) Regarding the various pieces of religious-related legislation, Ms. Kuruppu was not familiar with the current status of the JHU's anti-conversion bill nor had any input to a similar bill that the GSL was drafting. She assumed that the Attorney General's Department would refer any related matter to the minister before sending it to Parliament and,

therefore, would not comment on anything until it had been officially referred to the minister. (Note: In trying to detangle the legal process for these bills, we have not heard that it is a requirement for the Christian Affairs Ministry to be consulted.) When asked about the process of developing a response to any legislation, Kuruppu said that Minister would not comment until he had conferred with the Catholic Church and the NCC.

10. (C) Separately, when asked about the November 1 attack on the Matugama Church, ministry officials said they had no knowledge of the incident, despite reporting in several local English-language papers. Kuruppu told poloff that the ministry would ask the police directly to report on any attack on a church. During a follow-up December 6 conversation, another ministry official told poloff she was not aware of the latest attacks (see para 7) and asked for a fax with the relevant information.

Comment

11. (C) The GSL, as represented by the Buddhist and Christian Affairs ministries, seems to be adopting a head-in-the-sand approach to the JHU's proposed amendment, apparently hoping, by refusing to acknowledge it, that it will disappear. While the JHU is likely grandstanding for political attention with all its actions, the upcoming anniversary of Soma Thero's death is giving cause for some concern among Christians, but considerably less so than a year ago. The JHU, which had not been created at the time of Soma Thero's death, seems to be trying to capitalize on Soma Thero's death to rally support. The atmosphere in Colombo and around Sri Lanka at Christmas time 2003 was one of much greater fear and anxiety than today; attacks on churches in December 2003 were reaching a climax and there were reports of several incidents weekly. The situation has improved in a year, although not necessarily due to any improvement in relations among the different faiths. To some extent, the JHU and its followers have been able to channel their energy into the anti-conversion bill and the proposed constitutional amendment. With the general lack of support for these legislative efforts, the JHU has decided to create this public campaign to force the GSL to address its issues. It is unlikely the party will be successful. End Comment.

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